

BUD, NOT BUDDY

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

What does it actually take to find a family and a home, when the one you were born into is gone — and what do the rules a kid makes up to survive reveal about what they really need?

Novel: Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis

Setting: Flint and Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1936

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 4–6, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete 19-chapter novel, including the nonfiction afterword. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

This novel is grounded in real Great Depression and Jim Crow-era history, and in the author's own family. Read for source authority, purpose, and limits, and let the afterword guide how much of the story is drawn from real life.

Accuracy safeguard

Curtis's own afterword explains that Herman E. Calloway and Lefty Lewis are inspired by his real grandfathers — a bandleader and a Negro Leagues pitcher — but the plot and characters in the novel itself are fictional. Treat the afterword as the most reliable guide to what's fact and what's invention.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. The Great Depression in Michigan

The Great Depression (beginning in 1929) hit industrial cities like Flint, Michigan especially hard, as auto manufacturing and other factory work collapsed, leaving many families without income. Depression-era shantytowns nicknamed “Hooverilles” (after President Herbert Hoover, blamed by many for the crisis) sprang up in cities across the country, including Flint.

Inquiry question

How does knowing Flint's specific industrial history change your understanding of why so many families in the novel are struggling?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. Sundown Towns and Racial Segregation in the 1930s North

“Sundown towns” — communities where Black Americans faced serious danger if they remained after dark — existed throughout the United States in this era, including in Northern and Midwestern states like Michigan, not only in the South. This is a well-documented but sometimes underrecognized part of American history.

Inquiry question

How does this real history change your understanding of the risks Bud faces traveling alone as a Black child in 1936 Michigan?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. The Real Family History Behind the Book

Christopher Paul Curtis has described basing Herman E. Calloway on his grandfather Herman E. Curtis Sr., a real 1930s bandleader, and basing Lefty Lewis on his other grandfather, Earl “Lefty” Lewis, a real pitcher in the Negro Leagues. The novel's plot and characters are fictional, but this family history is real and documented in the author's own accounts.

Inquiry question

How does knowing this real family connection change how you read the novel's dedication to finding family and home?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. The Negro Leagues: Baseball Under Segregation

Major League Baseball excluded Black players from the late 1800s until Jackie Robinson broke the color line in 1947. In the meantime, Black players formed their own professional leagues, known as the Negro Leagues, which featured many players now recognized as among the greatest in baseball history.

Inquiry question

What does knowing this history add to your understanding of the character inspired by a real Negro Leagues pitcher?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. Jazz in the 1930s

The 1930s were a major era for jazz and swing music in the United States, with Black musicians and bandleaders playing a central role in shaping the genre, often touring extensively despite facing segregation and unequal treatment on the road.

Inquiry question

How does this history help explain both the pride and the hardship suggested by Calloway's band and its touring life?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Riding the Rails: Real Depression-Era Hobo Culture

During the Depression, large numbers of unemployed people, including many teenagers, traveled the country by illegally hopping freight trains in search of work, a practice historians call “riding the rails.” Railroad security guards, sometimes called “bulls,” and the journeys themselves carried real, serious dangers.

Inquiry question
How does this real history change your understanding of the risk Bud and Bugs take at the train yard?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
A reputable Michigan historical society on the Great Depression in Flint	Regional economic history	General history; individual family experiences varied.
Documented historical research on sundown towns (e.g., a university or civil rights research archive)	Accurate background on Northern racial segregation	A serious, sometimes difficult history; handle with care in class.
Christopher Paul Curtis's own published author's notes or interviews	Primary-source account of the real family history behind the novel	A personal account; corroborate specific historical claims elsewhere.
National Baseball Hall of Fame or Negro Leagues Baseball Museum	Authoritative history of the Negro Leagues	Focuses on baseball history broadly, not this specific fictional character.

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I distinguish the novel's fictional plot from the real family history described in the afterword.
- ☐ I present sundown towns and Jim Crow-era segregation as real, documented history, handled with care.
- ☐ I credit the real Negro Leagues and 1930s jazz musicians accurately, without overstating any single connection to the novel.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (Depression-era economics, historical segregation) from ethical claims (how people should treat one another).
- ☐ I do not treat this one family's story as representative of every Black family's experience in this era.
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your understanding of Bud's journey — and where does the story resist that lens?
